The United Nations warns that Myanmar's death toll from this week's deadly cyclone could reach 60,000. CNN quotes Shari Villarosa, the top U.S. diplomat there, as saying over 100,000 may have died in the country's delta region alone. Aid is desperately needed on a war footing. But humanitarian aid does not justify going to war as called for by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner in urging the UN Security Council to pass a resolution under the "responsibility to protect" norm to force the delivery of aid over any objections from the country's ruling military.

Mr. Kouchner is one of the unrepentant "humanitarian warriors" who gave "humanitarian intervention" such a bad name that we had to rescue the deeply divisive idea and repackage it into the more unifying and politically marketable "responsibility to protect" (R2P) which was endorsed by world leaders at the UN in 2005. There would be no better way to damage R2P beyond repair in Asia and the developing world than to have humanitarian assistance delivered into Myanmar backed by Western soldiers fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia again. If France has soldiers to spare for serious combat, they could relieve embattled Canadians in southern Afghanistan.

John Holmes, the former British ambassador to France, has rightly rejected Mr. Kouchner's call as unnecessarily confrontational. He said co-operation from Myanmar authorities was "reasonable and heading in the right direction."

To be sure, Myanmar's military junta has been an unmitigated disaster.

My all too vivid impressions of the country are of a gentle people suffering horribly under an unrelentingly oppressive regime that has stolen and squandered the nation's wealth. Where, in most cases, there is some redeeming feature, I can think of none regarding this distasteful regime.

Hesitations about invoking R2P are not based, therefore, in any tender thoughts about the junta. R2P is one of the most important normative advances in global governance since the Second World War. We managed to find international consensus on it by putting it in non-confrontational language, restricting the circumstances in which outside military intervention is justified to halt large-scale killings (not death caused by natural disasters) or ethnic cleansing, and surrounding it with prevention before and reconstruction after such intervention.

Prospects of R2P providing the legal and normative foundation for a military intervention to stop killings will diminish if it is abused and misused. As it is, we can detect signs of a rollback as some countries that previously endorsed it in 2005 now develop symptoms of buyer's remorse.
Neither is the R2P cause helped by misapplying it to situations such as Myanmar's cyclone. Instead of securing timely action, it would complicate humanitarian relief efforts in this particular case and more generally afterward.

The solution to untying the knot in delivering aid to Myanmar lies in invigorated efforts at four levels, based on solidarity with the victims, not the rights and privileges of intervenors.

First, in direct exchanges with the Burmese authorities. Second, in making encouraging but non-threatening resolutions and statements at the UN by the Secretary-General and presidents of the General Assembly and Security Council. Third, by the major Asian powers - China, India and Japan. And fourth, by the Southeast Asian neighbours of Burma, including ASEAN, the regional organization.

If the Asians come on board, political progress will be swift in unblocking obstacles and the delivery of humanitarian aid will be effective. Furthermore, the use of the prevention and reconstruction language of R2P (but not the military intervention component) will promote the political legitimacy of military intervention when and where it becomes necessary.

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